

# A Narrative Exploration into Counsellors' experiences of the influence of a fundamentalist religious upbringing on mental health and wellbeing in adulthood.

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**Research Question:** 'Might a fundamentalist religious upbringing be an influential factor on mental health and wellbeing in adulthood? What are Counsellors' experiences?'

**Aims/Purpose:** This research focuses on counsellors' understandings of the influence of a fundamentalist religious upbringing on mental health and well-being in adulthood. Fundamentalism, distinct from radicalisation or extremism, refers to religious tradition based on literal interpretation of the Torah, Bible or Qur'an, resulting in strict rules for life. Numerous studies suggest that childhood relationships and environment, are influential to mental health however, there is sparse UK literature on the research topic. Additionally, findings indicate that counsellors can feel ill equipped to work with religion and would like further training in this area (Christoudoulidi, 2011, Hofmann & Walach, 2011). This research seeks to fill the gap.

**Design Methodology:** A qualitative Narrative Inquiry combining relational-centred, reflexive (Finlay & Evans, 2009) with the collaborative, narrative approach (Arvay, 2002). The priority being to gather and represent peoples' unique stories (Etherington, 2004). Recruitment was through professional bodies, a training college, psychology today and social media sites. Twenty counsellors underwent online preliminary interviews during Summer 2019. Purposeful sampling was then used to gain diversity of representation across the Abrahamic faiths. Eight co-researchers (one later withdrew) were invited to proceed, data collection being via unstructured interviews. Following transcription co-researchers separately analysed the transcript before a joint interpretative interview produced a blended text and 'pen-portraits' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).



**Ethical Consent:** Ethical approval for this project has been secured from Metanoia Institute/Middlesex University.

## Preliminary Findings

**Some co-researchers have recognised some benefits of a religious upbringing including:**

- Foundational beliefs and values.
- Knowledge of religious matters.
- A sense of belonging in a religious community

**Identified disadvantages have included:**

- A 'them and us' culture.
- Feeling different.
- Imposed rigid rules.

## Preliminary Conclusions

- While some co-researchers believe that they have greater resilience in adulthood because of their religious upbringing others have connected both physical and mental health challenges e.g. heart issues, M.E., depression, psychosis, nervous breakdowns and PTSD to growing up in a fundamentalist religious environment.

## Quotations

*"...well you might be wicked, so you might come home from school, and your parents aren't there so they've been raptured and you're on your own" (CR1)*

*"What that (religious) system does really is provide that sort of comfort, safety, security, grounding for peoples' you know mental health and emotional well-being" (CR3)*

*"So, the sense of being entirely lost or entirely precious, because those were the polarities weren't they, those were the heaven and hell. There was no, well maybe you'll end up somewhere in the middle" (CR6)*

*"They had specific lines, beliefs, rules and regulations that didn't just affect you on a Sunday but lived with you through the week" (CR7)*

*"I didn't have a lot of choice or control over my religious narrative as a child and that was a real kind of instigator in me having really poor mental health as a child, a teenager and as an adult" (CR8)*

## Feedback from Co-researchers

*"It has been an immensely positive, enriching and precious process..." (CR1).*

*"Both the questions that I was asked and the generous sharing by Gill of some of her own experiences, gave me pause for thought, not only about my own experiences but how important a topic this is in a broader sense" (CR3).*

*"I was faced, I believe, with a deeper understanding of the reality that my mental health had/had been massively affected by my fundamentalist religious upbringing - and that it continues to affect" (CR6).*

*"It caused me to reflect on life and those moments of challenge and creative change .... Changes that have been positive and not left me with a heritage that could have remained stuck in simple black and white rules" (CR7).*

**Limitations:** This is a small-scale qualitative study and therefore has limited generalisability. Participants are from the Abrahamic faiths and it is imperative to acknowledge that co-researchers from other religions may have produced other results.

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2. Christoudoulidi, F. (2011) Counselling, spirituality and culture. In W. West (2011) (ed) *Exploring Therapy, Spirituality and Healing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
3. Etherington, K. (2004) *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Our Selves in Research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
4. Finlay, L. & Evans, K. (eds) (2009) *Relational-centred Research for Psychotherapists: Exploring Meanings and Experiences*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
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